WHOSE EARTH IS IT?
July 13, 2003

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PSALM 24
GENESIS 1:1-5, 26-31; 2:15

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it."
Psalm 24:1 (NRSV)

"Startle us, O God, with your truth. And open our hearts to your word: that hearing, we may believe, and believing trust you with our lives in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Have you ever asked someone a question and, when the answer started to come, immediately regretted asking? It's a kind of common operating guideline in our family developed over the years—don't ask Dad a question unless you want a really long answer. And when they can't avoid asking, they now say—"We want the short form, an executive summary."

Well, it happened to me this week. I had been thinking for some time about the scripture text for this Sunday in the church year, particularly Psalm 24 with its simple but profound first sentence. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." That's quite an assertion actually. We don't own the place. It belongs to someone else. We're just guests—temporary at that.

It set me to thinking about all the ways we human beings are pretty rude guests in someone else's place: how we mess the place up and leave it far worse for our temporary visit: how it was actually in better shape when we moved in than it's going to be when we move out and the next guests come along. It set me to thinking that we act like we own the place and don't care much about it.

And that's when I asked a question I wished I hadn't. I asked a physician I know who just finished a Masters Degree in Public Health, specializing in Environmental Medicine, what she knew about pollution and chemical wastes and toxic substances: that is—how we're trashing the place.

"I know quite a bit, actually," she said, and then proceeded to pay me back for the time years ago when she was a little girl and asked me who started the Civil War, and my answer started with an explanation of the cultural and social differences between the North and South and the world cotton

market and the use of slavery economically—winding up a half hour later at Fort Sumter.

So, she told me that the U.S. has 4 percent of the world's population and produces 25 percent of the greenhouse gases that are polluting the atmosphere, and that most scientists conclude are causing or exacerbating Global Warming.

She referred me to a book I was happier not knowing about, *Living Downstream* by Sandra Steingraber, in which the author observes:

- In 1993, 91 percent of Illinois's rivers and streams showed pesticide contamination.
- In Illinois, 1500 hazardous waste sites are in need of remediation.
- As of 1990, the U.S. EPA had counted 32,645 sites of past chemical waste dumping in need of clean up nationwide.
- Tri-chloro ethylene (TCE) is a metal degreaser in paint remover, spot remover, cosmetics, and rug cleaner. Classified by EPA as a probable human carcinogen, detectable amounts are in the air above the Arctic Circle.

She also told me that about one-third of the chemical pesticides imported into less developed nations in South and Central America, mostly from the United States, are banned here because of their toxicity.

I am not much of an environmentalist, I confess. I appreciate those who are. I profoundly wish my government would do more for the environment than it does. But I confess (like many of you, I suspect) that I am easily distracted by other, more dramatic, and more immediate issues. But that new information bothers me—that and the fact that the Psalter assignment for this Sunday all over the Christian world is Psalm 24 with its innocent but powerful first sentence. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" or the older, better translation—"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

The fullness … does it startle you each summer—as it does me—the earth's fullness?

I've concluded that you probably have to live more than five decades for it to get to you—the amazing miracle of life in nature, the dependable fertility, the beautiful lush greenness that returns every year. We miss it for the first decades of life because we're busy, distracted. But then one day the amazing miracle of the Earth, our home, is right there in front of our eyes.

On a recent drive east from Pittsburg over the Allegheny mountains I could barely keep my eyes on the road for drinking in the beauty, the vast, rolling green mountains as far as the eye could see, the morning fog and sparkling sun. What possibly could significantly damage it? It is so big, so fertile, so gorgeously productive, so willing to provide food and clothing and shelter and energy and beauty.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." The Bible makes an important assertion. The place doesn't belong to us. The earth is the creator's—God's. We're allowed to live in it and to enjoy it and to use its amazing productivity. But we don't own it and so are not free to do with it whatever we want.

The problem is that we act like it's ours alone and in the process we seem to be creating some fairly significant problems for those who will come after us.

Bill McKibben, who wrote a book, *The End of Nature*, about the environmental crisis, warns us not to be fooled by what appears to be the vastness of the earth. I'm fooled regularly, I confess, as I drive over those wonderful Pennsylvania mountains and see miles and miles of green without a smokestack in sight and find myself thinking: what's the problem? Doesn't appear to be a population explosion or an environmental crisis here. Don't be fooled, McKibben says. The margin is quite small. Life exists in a tiny band of atmosphere five and one-half miles deep—which is sea level to the top of Mt. Everest. And into that tiny envelope human beings have been pouring poison in the form of carbon dioxide, methane, and other toxic gases for several centuries. The trees, of course, are the system's wonderful mechanism for cleansing the atmosphere. And we're cutting them down at a rapidly accelerating rate—to build houses, to create farm land, to get at the oil beneath the surface which, when burned, will pour more poison into the envelope.

What's worse, those gases serve as insulation to keep heat inside the envelope—so they are called greenhouse gases. The result is global warming. The 1990s were the hottest decade on record. 1998 was the warmest year since we started paying attention 125 years ago. Climate does change. But there is consensus now, backed by literally tons of evidence, that global warming is happening, and at the very least we are making it happen faster and more dangerously by this whole matter of pouring poison into the little envelope.

- Mt. Kilimanjaro has lost 75 percent of its ice cap—which could vanish altogether in 15 years.

- Montana will lose all the glaciers in Glacier National Park by 2070.

- Coral reefs are dying as the oceans warm.

- Arctic permafrost is thawing.

And we have all heard the draconian results of a rise in ocean levels that would flood large, densely populated landmasses such as coastal Florida, lower Manhattan, and the entire nation of Bangladesh.

There is something mind numbing about all of that. But what isn't mind-numbing is the public policy of our government which has now effectively marginalized the entire issue. We infuriated our allies and the rest of the world by walking out of the Kyoto Conference and rejecting the treaty. The treaty is flawed and unbalanced. But we walked away from the table and have not returned. We seem determined to reverse decades of environmental guidelines and policies about oil drilling on public land. And we can't even muster the common sense to apply consistent emission controls on the SUVs that now dominate the passenger vehicle market.

So what's the problem? Why won't we be a leader on this issue? How is it that we are willing to invest so much in our security without much considering this enormous threat to life—ours and everybody else's? Someone suggested that the reason is quite simple, actually. We—the politicians we elect, and we personally—won't be around to suffer the results when they occur and that adds up to a classic political conundrum … let our children and grandchildren deal with it.

We could all do better. We can recycle and ride the bus instead of driving, buy a hybrid car the next time, and write our congresspersons and sign open letters and support organizations which work for environmental sanity. But this is a Christian Church, not the Sierra Club, and so the most important thing you and I can do here is put this whole matter in the context of our faith, our theological tradition and the Bible, God's word to us.

My argument this morning is not political—but theological, and Biblical.

The Bible starts with that simple but profound assertion that "the earth is the Lord's." The Psalter celebrates the creation and the creator in gorgeous poetry:

> For the Lord is a great God
> In his hands are the depths of the earth,
> The heights of the mountains are his also
> The sea is his … and the dry land.
> Psalm 35

O sing to the Lord a new song,
Sing to the Lord, all the earth …
Let the heavens be glad,
and let the earth rejoice,
let the sea roar, and all that fills it.
Let the field exult and everything in it.
Psalm 96

In the first chapters of Genesis, the story of creation is told. And while we're fussing with the issues of whether or not it is accurate historically and scientifically, where the garden was, and how Cain found a wife if his parents, Adam and Eve, were the first humans, we miss what the story is about—which is that God is the creator, the creation is good, God blesses the creation and God puts human beings in it to enjoy it and take care of it. In the Bible we get the responsibility for tending to the garden. God puts people in the garden and tells them to "till it and keep it," God puts people in the creation process—to exercise responsibility over all the rest of it. "Dominion" is the word the Bible uses. And it does not mean to pillage and pollute, to poison and exhaust. It means to take care, loving, tender, and responsible care of the precious gift of the Earth.

That is at the very heart of our faith, the goodness and fullness of God's creation and our God given responsibility to take good care of it.

And then, in the fullness of time, God came into the creation, into the world, in the birth of a child in Bethlehem. And among the many meanings the incarnation—the gift of Jesus Christ—has for us is this. God loves and blesses the world and human life by visiting it and becoming part of it, by living and dying in it and by rising again to redeem it—the whole creation, about which St. Paul wrote provocatively, is groaning in anticipation, waiting for, longing for its redemption, its wholeness, its salvation.

Our Lord Jesus lived close to the earth. He took some of his most memorable images from nature: "Consider the lilies" he said, as one who obviously had done just that. He used flowers and grain, shrubs and trees, birds and sea and sky to teach about God and God's world and our place in it.

Why is it then that Christians don't seem to care much? Some conclude that it's because we think the focus of our religion is really the next world, not this one. It does seem that way, doesn't it, that the purpose of religion is to get us into heaven—not improve things here on earth. Elaine Pagels, a Princeton religious scholar, says that it began early in our history—in the 4th Century—when Augustine, our first great theologian, forgot about the Old Testament and our Hebrew ancestry with its earthy commitments to the

world and its emphasis on human responsibility and bought into the prevailing Greek philosophy which taught that reality is divided between spirit and matter, and matter is definitely inferior: that religion ought to deliver us from flesh and bodies and sensuality: that to be religious is to turn from this world and face the next. It was Augustine whose theology suggested that God must have made a big mistake by giving human beings bodies … a concept much of the Christian Church, Catholic and Protestant, still seems to want to embrace.

A Yale study a few years ago showed that the more religious people are the less they are inclined to care about the environment … and perhaps the most famous example was former Secretary of the Interior James Watt, an evangelical Christian who said publicly that long range conservation of natural resources was unnecessary because Jesus was coming again and the world would soon end, so why bother.

Whatever the historical reason, it is time now for people of faith to repent and recover our oldest theological and biblical tradition.

The invitation is to reclaim both the gift, the amazing miracle of the earth—and—to reclaim the responsibility God has given us.

The invitation is to recover our own oldest tradition—reverence for the creation, praise and gratitude to the creator.

When he was 82 and critically ill, the great theologian Karth Barth wrote:

> "In retrospect, I have no serious complaint, except my failure to be grateful. Perhaps I have some difficult days ahead and sooner or later I have the day of my death. What remains for me in all my days and finally that last day is—'forget not all his benefits.'" [Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nature, God and Pulpit*, p.39]

The invitation, particularly I think to city people who live in a world of concrete, steel, glass … is to recover the God-given ness of the world—the world the poets call us to see:

> i thank thee God for most this amazing day
> for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
> and a blue true dream of sky
> and for everything
> which is natural which is infinite
> which is yes
> (e e cummings)

and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit priest:

Glory be to God for dappled things
For skies of couple—colour …
For rose—moles
For trout that swim

We are invited to reclaim our oldest theology of creation, the praise and gratitude it evokes—and the responsibility.

We're the ones: the only ones. Bill McKibben in the *End of Nature* says we're much stronger than we thought. We can make it or break it. The garden is ours to till and tend or ignore and destroy.

We are Christians. We believe that Jesus Christ came into the world, as the incarnation of the creator God among us. At the very least that suggests that the world he made and in which he lived is a good and lovely place which, given half a chance, will continue to feed our souls with beauty and provide for our children after us.

We do not inherit the earth from the past, someone said; we borrow it from them, the children.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

Amen.